

## **Facing the Deepest Darkness of Despair and Abandonment: Psalm 88 and the Life of Faith**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Psalm 88 has been called an embarrassment to conventional faith. The psalm is unique when compared with other psalms of lament. In Ps 88 we find the desperate cry of someone who seeks to connect with YHWH, but YHWH keeps silent. The psalmist finds himself in the deepest darkness of abandonment and despair. Yet, his unanswered cry does not silence the poet. YHWH may stay quiet, but not the psalmist. He continues to hurl his cries into an empty sky, convinced that even in the face of YHWH's inattention, YHWH must still be addressed. Even when confronted with the reality of death, death caused by YHWH, the poet sticks to his protest, to be met yet again with more silence. YHWH doesn't speak, He doesn't act, and He doesn't care. The poet is ignored, snubbed, shunned, and rejected. The last word he speaks is darkness. What should one do about this complete silence and this bottomless darkness? What is this psalm doing in the Bible? What does this psalm say about the life of faith? What should one's response be when facing this dark night of the soul? Should one abandon God in the face of his desertion? This paper argues that Ps 88 stands as a signpost for realism in the life of faith.*

### **A INTRODUCTION**

Psalm 88 has been called "an embarrassment to conventional faith."<sup>1</sup> What we hear in the psalm is a voice of despair, fear, and hopelessness, crying out to a silent and absent God. It is little wonder that Ps 88 is often regarded as one of the darkest corners of the Psalter. The psalm certainly is quite unique when compared with other psalms of lament. It is immediately noticeable that Ps 88 lacks a developed petition, an expression of assurance of being heard, or any vow of praise. The psalm is the desperate cry of someone who seeks to connect with YHWH, but the sound of YHWH's silence explodes in his ears. The psalmist finds himself in the deepest darkness of abandonment and despair. Yet, his unanswered cry does not silence the poet. YHWH may stay quiet, but not the psalmist. He continues to hurl his cries into an empty sky, convinced that even in the face of YHWH's inattention, YHWH must still be addressed. Even when confronted with the reality of death, death caused by YHWH, the poet sticks to his protest, to be met yet again with more silence. YHWH doesn't speak, He

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 78.

doesn't act, and He doesn't care. The poet is ignored, snubbed, shunned, and rejected. The last word he speaks is darkness. His life of faith has ended in darkness. Nothing has changed, nothing has been resolved, and life has been denied. Our journey with the psalmist takes us "into the dark night of his soul, and the darkness is deep."<sup>2</sup>

What should one do about this complete silence and this bottomless darkness? What is this psalm doing in the Bible? What does this psalm say about the life of faith? What should one's response be when facing this dark night of the soul? Should one abandon God in the face of his desertion? In this paper I will analyse Ps 88 and will argue that the psalm stands as a signpost for realism in the life of faith.

Mandolfo<sup>3</sup> points out that in addition to the fact that Ps 88 has not found a place in the liturgy or lectionaries of the Church, many scholars have also shunned away from addressing the theological implications of the psalm. She argues that the very bleakness of the psalm and all the other qualities that have turned it into a black sheep actually "transform it into one of the most meaningful prayers ever uttered, and more to the point, one of the most meaningful prayers that *can* be uttered."<sup>4</sup>

## B STRUCTURE, GATTUNG, SITZ IM LEBEN

### 1 Structure

Gerstenberger<sup>5</sup> argues for the following structure: in addition to the superscription, vv. 2-3 contain the invocation and initial plea, while vv. 4-10a form the first complaint consisting of a description of suffering (vv. 4-6) and an accusation (vv. 7-10a). Verses 10b-13 constitute the second complaint and can be subdivided into a description of prayer (vv. 10b-c) and a contestation of God (vv. 11-13). The third complaint can be found in vv. 14-19 and can be divided into three parts: a description of prayer (v. 14), an accusation of God (v. 15) and a description of suffering (vv. 16-19).

Hossfeld & Zenger<sup>6</sup> offer a slightly different version of the above, proposing a division of the psalm into three sections, namely vv. 2-10a, 10b-13,

<sup>2</sup> Robert Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship: A Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 289.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Carleen Mandolfo, "Psalm 88 and the Holocaust: Lament in Search of a Divine Response," *BibInt* 15/2 (2007): 155-157.

<sup>4</sup> Mandolfo, "Psalm 88," 157.

<sup>5</sup> Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms Part 2 and Lamentations* (FOTL 15; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 141; cf. also Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60-150* (CC; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 192.

<sup>6</sup> Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *A Commentary on Psalms 51-100* (vol. 2 of *Psalms*; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 391-392; cf. also Christiane de

and 14-19. The psalmist emphasises his cries of lament on three occasions providing an introduction to the following sections: vv. 2-3 introduce the reader to the description that follows in vv. 4-10a, v. 10b-c serves as the introductory lament to vv. 11-13, while v. 14 initiates the subsequent description of the crisis in vv. 14-19. This proposal seems logical and it presents a structure I agree with.<sup>7</sup>

Several structural observations are important.<sup>8</sup> The introductory laments all have certain features in common. First, the name of God, YHWH, is mentioned in vv. 2a, 10b and 14a. Verse 2a elaborates on this by referring to "YHWH, God of my salvation." Secondly, they all contain verbs of lament: v. 2 "calling, crying" (קַעַץ), v. 10 "call" (אָרַק), v. 14 "call for help" (עִזָּשׁ pi'el). Thirdly, they portray a climactic time scheme: "by day, in the night" (v. 2), "every day" (v. 10) and "in the morning" (v. 14).

Section 1 and section 3 relate to each other both semantically and via their motifs.<sup>9</sup> The middle section constitutes the compositional centre of the psalm. The section also serves as the "axis of meaning in the psalm"<sup>10</sup> with a specific theological and linguistic profile. Although this section also features a perspective on death, so prevalent in the psalm, the focus is not on the possible death of the poet, but on death in general. The suffering of the dead in Sheol is not described, but from the absence of YHWH in Sheol and thus also its inhabitants, the psalmist argues by means of a series of rhetorical questions that it is in YHWH's own best interests not to allow the petitioner to go to Sheol ahead of his time. If this should happen, YHWH would be robbed of someone to worship Him and to witness to his power. These questions serve to move YHWH to action as a God of salvation (cf. v. 2). Only in the middle section are praiseworthy characteristics of YHWH mentioned: wonders, care, faithfulness and justice. Only in this section does YHWH's power appear as bright and glorious in contrast to the darkness of Sheol.

The superscription to the psalm is fairly elaborate and attributes the psalms to the sons of Korah. To this a musical note has been added as well as a second reference to an author, namely Heman the Ezrahite. He was known as singer and liturgist (cf. 1 Chr 2:6; 6:18-23 [MT]; 15:17, 19; 16:41-42). In 1 Kings 5:11 (MT) he is mentioned along with Ethan the Ezrahite (cf. Ps 89:1) as

Vos, *Klage als Gotteslob aus der Tiefe* (FAT 2/11; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 24-25.

<sup>7</sup> For an argument for a division of the psalm into two stanzas (2-10a, 10b-19) of three strophes each, cf. Beat Weber, *Die Psalmen 73 bis 150* (vol. 2 of *Werkbuch Psalmen*; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2003), 103-104.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 51-100*, 392-393 for an excellent discussion of these and other issues.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 51-100*, 392 for a discussion on this.

<sup>10</sup> Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 51-100*, 392.

one of the famous wise men of Solomon's reign. The musical indication, **לענות**, **על-מחלה**, is difficult to explain. The noun **מחלה** carries the meaning "illness." **לענות** can possibly mean "to be sung in a depressed / muffled voice."<sup>11</sup> It is probably best to understand the expression as some kind of musical reference that is appropriate for lament.<sup>12</sup>

## 2 ***Gattung***

There is no doubt that Ps 88 should be classified as a lament of the individual. The psalm is however quite unique: it lacks a developed petition, and even more important, there is no expression of assurance that the petitioner has been heard; nor is there any vow of praise. The movement from lament to praise, so often present in psalms of lament, is totally absent.<sup>13</sup>

## 3 ***Sitz im Leben***

Kraus<sup>14</sup> argues that the petitioner of the psalm is someone who is very ill and probably close to death. It is not possible to determine the specific illness he is suffering from. The psalm is permeated with darkness. No enemies are mentioned, nor any guilt due to sin. Possibly the petitioner has been ill since his youth and lives outside the city gate as an outcast. This is a possible scenario for the psalm, although there are many other situations of distress that would equally fit the language of the poet. Hossfeld & Zenger<sup>15</sup> correctly point out that when one takes the multi-layered character of the depiction of the catastrophe and the overlay of metaphors into account and recognises that this is a very complex description of a situation where the poet is threatened by death, an interpretation that narrows the situation to illness is not adequate to the text of the psalm.

Gerstenberger<sup>16</sup> maintains that the psalm was probably used in prayer services outside the sanctuary during pre-exilic times. The strong complaint of the psalm indicates a very intimate relationship between the psalmist and God. He argues that the official cult could not offer such intimacy. From a family or clan background the poem moved into Jewish congregations where it was

<sup>11</sup> Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 51-100*, 390.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100* (WBC 20; Dallas: Word, 1990), 394-395 for a discussion of possible theories on the meaning of the expression.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Mandolfo, "Psalm 88," 155 who rightly points out that Ps 88 is the only psalm in the Psalter where there is no change to thanksgiving, no vow of praise, and no third-person didactic voice. We would expect a faithful/faith-filled "answer" to the poet's lament, but the psalm ends where it began – with anger and protest, in beginning, middle, and end.

<sup>14</sup> Kraus, *60-150*, 192.

<sup>15</sup> Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 51-100*, 391.

<sup>16</sup> Gerstenberger, *Psalms 2*, 145-146.

prayed during special services on behalf of "hopelessly destitute persons as an expression of extreme despair in the face of grave distress."<sup>17</sup>

## C ANALYSIS OF PSALM 88

### 1 God of my salvation, I cry out to You; You are to Blame for my Troubles (Ps 88:2-10a)

The first section of the psalm is introduced by the lament of v. 2. The poet cries to "YHWH, the God of my salvation." God is thus addressed as the God of the covenant, the God who had certain responsibilities as the covenant God. The psalmist personalises his relationship with God by referring to Him as "God of my salvation." This address declares the hope and faith of the poet that God is able to rescue him from his crisis. By addressing YHWH thus, the psalmist also wishes to persuade YHWH to act as the God of his salvation.<sup>18</sup> The rest of the psalm stands in great contrast to this claim; but the poet lays the foundation that despite everything, he will cling to this hope. This expectation that God will save him is "the deepest theological basis for this psalm."<sup>19</sup> The "Thou" address of God throughout the psalm further underlines this.<sup>20</sup>

Brueggemann's comments on the address of God as "Thou" are profound: "The psalms are *prayers addressed to a known, named, identifiable You*. This is the most stunning and decisive factor in the prayers of the Psalter. Prayer is direct address to, and conversation and communion with, an agent known from a shared, treasured past."<sup>21</sup> This means that there is no vagueness, no lack of focus, in Israel's prayers. It also means that Israel is well aware that real Life never begins with "I" but always with "Thou."<sup>22</sup>

It is obvious that the poet finds himself in the midst of a terrible crisis: He cries out to God day and night, continuously, indicating that God has not answered. The verb נִזְעַק often indicates a cry of anguish or distress (cf. Ps 107:6, 28).<sup>23</sup> This is no polite, softly spoken prayer, but the heart wrenching cry of someone who has reached the end of his strength. The distress he experi-

<sup>17</sup> Gerstenberger, *Psalms* 2, 146.

<sup>18</sup> David M. Howard, "Psalm 88 and the Rhetoric of Lament," in *My Words Are Lovely: Studies in the Rhetoric of the Psalms* (ed. Robert L. Foster and David M. Howard; LHBOTS 467; London: T & T Clark, 2008), 135-136 describes this as the internal rhetorical function of the psalm, where the poet tries to persuade YHWH to act on his behalf. As will be seen, in Ps 88 YHWH does not respond to the psalmist and does not show himself to be the God of salvation.

<sup>19</sup> Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 51-100*, 394.

<sup>20</sup> Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 51-100*, 394.

<sup>21</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "The Psalms as prayer," in *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (ed. Patrick D. Miller; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 34.

<sup>22</sup> Brueggemann, "Psalms as prayer," 34-35.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Davidson, *Vitality of Worship*, 290.

ences is most severe. He desires that his cries should catch the ear of God and that God should pay proper attention to him. Goldingay<sup>24</sup> suggests that the change in preposition from נִנְדָּך (v. 2) to לִפְנֵיךְ (v. 3) is significant. It is possible to be in someone's presence without the other person really paying attention to you. נִנְדָּך (v. 2) possibly suggests this. לִפְנֵיךְ (v. 3) is more vivid, suggesting that the other person is looking at us, really paying attention to what we are saying. There is a tone of helplessness in the cry of the psalmist; therefore he turns to God, hoping that YHWH would prove Himself to be the God of his salvation. In the midst of his miseries, he clings to God with desperate hope.

After the initial lament, the psalmist provides a description of his suffering (vv. 4-6) followed by an accusation against God (vv. 7-10a). The crisis he finds himself in is severe: in the midst of life he has been delivered to the threatening and destructive power of Sheol. He vividly describes his situation: he is sated (שָׁבֵע) by distress (רָעָוָת). This depiction stands in sharp contrast with what usually satisfies: a fulfilled life (cf. Gen 25:8; 35:29; 1 Chr 23:1; 29:28; 2 Chr 24:15; Job 42:17) or a special relationship with God (cf. Ps 16:11).<sup>25</sup> Now he has to be satisfied with troubles and misery. He is standing face to face with the ultimate darkness; his life has drawn close to Sheol (v. 4). He has gone down to the pit (בּוֹר). The word בּוֹר refers to "the grave, the entrance and embodiment of the kingdom of death."<sup>26</sup> His strength and vitality have already left him (v. 5). Interestingly, the Hebrew uses the word גָּבָר here for man. This refers to man in his machismo, a strong man. The portrayal here is however, of a man who has run out of strength.<sup>27</sup> Kraus<sup>28</sup> understands this verse as an account of someone who is terminally ill, whose strength is already waning, and who is on the brink of death. He argues that outcasts, especially lepers, probably lived in tombs (cf. Mark 5:2) as living corpses. In the discussion on the possible *Sitz im Leben* of the psalm, I have already pointed out that there are many other situations of distress that would equally fit the language of the poet. The psalm depicts a situation where the poet is threatened by death, and taking its complexity into account a narrowing down of the situation to illness is not adequate to the text of the psalm.

The psalmist has been set loose amongst the dead. The word "set loose" (חָפֵשׁ) carries the meaning "free." It is used in Exod 21:2 of a debt slave who was to receive his freedom after six years of service. It is also used in 2 Kgs 15:5 of king Uzziah, whose leprosy has caused him to live in a "house of free-

<sup>24</sup> John Goldingay, *Psalms 42-89* (vol. 2 of *Psalms*; BCOTWP; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 647.

<sup>25</sup> Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 51-100*, 395; cf. also De Vos, *Klage als Gotteslob*, 26. She points out that 19 out of 25 occurrences of the verb שָׁבֵע in the Psalms, God is the one who satisfies.

<sup>26</sup> Kraus, 60-150, 193.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Goldingay, *Psalms 42-89*, 648.

<sup>28</sup> Kraus, 60-150, 193.

dom," exempted from royal duties. Its use here in Ps 88:6 is therefore highly ironic, but also extremely tragic. He is "free" from everything that makes life meaningful and enjoyable; he is "free" to be as good as dead.<sup>29</sup> He compares himself with those who are already in their graves, and worst of all, YHWH doesn't remember them anymore. He has been cut off from YHWH's hand, no longer in his presence or even in his memories. "Cut off" (חַלֵּל יָמִם) is probably a reference to those slain by the sword (חַלֵּל יְהָרֵב) as in Ezek 31:17, 18; 32:20, 21<sup>30</sup> (v. 6). He is close to the netherworld, far away from the land of the living, and even worse; far away from YHWH.

The last two clauses (v. 6c-d) serve as a bridge to the accusation levelled against God in vv. 7-9. Here the poet accuses God for being responsible for his distress in the face of death. YHWH is at fault; incomprehensibly, He is blameable for the horror of death and darkness facing the psalmist. The poet utilises a series of metaphors and images to graphically describe what YHWH has done. YHWH's actions are the direct cause for his existence as one already dead. YHWH has placed him in the depths of the pit, in deep and dark regions (v. 7). בָּור הַחַתִּוֹת refers to the most remote abysses of the underworld;<sup>31</sup> he truly is in a place of complete godforsakeness. He is separated from God, and everything is dark. Why has YHWH done this? There is no confession of sin, which indicates that YHWH is not punishing the psalmist in righteousness. Yet He has let loose his rage on the poet, crushing him underneath waves of inexplicable fury, leaving him utterly helpless. The verb סִמְךָ is used here ironically. It usually has a positive meaning, such as "support, uphold." Here it is used to indicate YHWH's fury pressing down on the psalmist (v. 8). One can but wonder; why does YHWH act so irrational? Socially the poet has become an outcast; people are so revolted at the sight of him that they avoid him at all cost. They are not the cause of his suffering; YHWH is, but they are appalled at the sight of the poet. He is shut in, thrown into a dark pit from which there is no escape (v. 9). His sorrow is overwhelming, pressing so hard on him that his eyes are growing dim, indicating that he is passing over into the realm of death (cf. Pss 6:8, 13:4, 19:9). Eye is here a synecdoche for the whole person and refers to someone's health or vitality (cf. 1 Sam 14:27, 29; Deut 34:7; Ezra 9:8). The eyes growing dim obviously then refers to someone losing his life force.

Rogerson<sup>32</sup> rightly points out that there appears to be a dark side of God, a side that puzzles and makes us uncomfortable because it doesn't conform to

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Davidson, *Vitality of Worship*, 290; Tate, 51-100, 396, 402.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Tate, 51-100, 402.

<sup>31</sup> Kraus, 60-150, 193.

<sup>32</sup> John W. Rogerson, *A Theology of the Old Testament: Cultural Memory, Communication, and Being Human* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 144-145. Cf. also John Goldingay, *Israel's Faith* (vol. 2 of *Old Testament Theology*; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), 78-80.

the image humans have of God. God is sometimes, as is the case here, associated with evil, in the sense that He allows certain calamities to happen to afflict the world, and his people particularly. He asserts that as difficult as these portrayals of God might be for the life of faith, it may well be an essential part of the God-human relationship. Without this dark side to God's character He might become a tool in a one-sided relationship.

## 2 Questions for YHWH (Ps 88:10b-13)

The second section also begins with a call to YHWH. Interestingly though, is the fact that YHWH is now the second word of the clause, not the first, as was the case in v. 1. The severity of his plight is again emphasised temporarily with the claim that he cries out "every day" with outstretched hands. The lifting of the hands is an indication of supplication (v. 10b-c). With a series of rhetorical questions, all to be answered "no," the poet reproaches God for his irrational attitude. Davidson<sup>33</sup> aptly describes this section as the most negative picture of what lies on the other side of death in the whole of the Hebrew Bible. The rhetorical purpose of these questions is to convince YHWH that He should act otherwise; He should intervene and involve Himself again in the life of the poet.

The questions contrast the world of the dead with YHWH's actions. These actions all illustrate YHWH's power over life. In the netherworld, existence is without God's wonderful deeds. This does not mean that YHWH is incapable of doing anything in Sheol; it does not mean that YHWH has no power there. YHWH is sovereign there and controls who goes there and who doesn't. He knows what goes on there and can reach into Sheol (cf. Ps 139:8; Amos 9:2). Yet YHWH chooses not to do anything in Sheol.<sup>34</sup> It is a terrible land of forgetfulness where no voice is raised in praising YHWH. The living praise God; death is praiseless (cf. Pss 6:6; 30:10; 115:17; Isa 38:18-19). Praise and life cannot be separated. To be truly alive, one must be able to offer praise to YHWH. When those who are alive cease to praise God, they are in fact already dead.<sup>35</sup> YHWH's faithfulness is not declared in the grave, YHWH's righteousness is unknown there. From the supplicant's point of view this serves to make YHWH aware of the paradox that the psalmist wants to live and witness in praise and thanksgiving to YHWH, while YHWH is doing everything to make that impossible.<sup>36</sup> While he is still living, his experiences are the same as those who already are in Sheol. Hossfeld and Zenger rightly ask whether the great salvation-historical statements about YHWH's relationship with his people do not become mere ideology if they are not realised in the daily lives of individu-

<sup>33</sup> Davidson, *Vitality of Worship*, 291

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Goldingay, *Psalms 42-89*, 653.

<sup>35</sup> Marvin E. Tate, "Psalm 88," *RevExp* 87/1 (1990): 92.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 51-100*, 395-396.

als.<sup>37</sup> That is the point this central section wishes to make: when and where YHWH cannot be praised, his divinity will be questioned. When He forgets those who worship Him (v. 6), He will soon be forgotten.<sup>38</sup>

### 3 Only Darkness is Left (Ps 88:14-19)

Although finding himself in the depths of despair, the poet is not silenced. With the silence of YHWH's voice roaring in his ears, the poet renews his lament in v. 14, crying out to YHWH, seeking Him in the morning. The morning was the time for new beginnings, and the time that God was expected to demonstrate anew his faithful love to his people (cf. Pss 46:6; 90:14; 143:8).<sup>39</sup> The Name of YHWH has moved again and is here the third word in the clause. This is significant and I think it indicates something of the fact that the poet is experiencing YHWH as being further and further away from him. The distance between supplicant and YHWH grows.

With renewed desperation the poet refuses to let go of God, even though He is ignoring him. The "why" questions of v. 15 are not a quest for information but they indicate the anxiety and fear of the poet. He has reached the end of his tether, he cannot take anymore. He cannot understand why God stays silent and snubs him. Goldingay<sup>40</sup> describes the "why" questions as a challenge to action, and not an inquiry. The psalmist recommences his accusations against God with another sequence of vivid images and metaphors. His suffering has been going on since his youth, he has been close to death for a long time, he is helpless under the weight of the terrors YHWH inflicts on him (v. 16). "Your terror" (*תִּמְאָן*) is used elsewhere in the OT for the terror or dread that YHWH produces in his enemies or sends against them (cf. Exod 15:16; 23:27; Deut 32:25; Job 9:24; 13:21).<sup>41</sup> God's anger has swept over him and his terrors are threatening destruction (v. 17). The word used in this verse for "terror" is *בָּעָתִים*. It occurs elsewhere only in Job 6:4, however the verb *בָּעַת* occurs in a number of texts (cf. Job 3:5; 7:14; 9:34; 13:11, 21; Isa 21:4; 1 Sam 16:15). In these texts YHWH's terrors act as his agents of destruction.<sup>42</sup>

The poet is drowning in dark waters (v. 18). There is no one left to support him. YHWH has driven away all his loved ones and his companions; no one is there for him; he is completely and utterly alone. He has one "friend" left: darkness. This means the absence of life, he finds himself in the realm of evil and chaos. This means the absence of God. It should however not be understood as the stoic acceptance of God's absence and the darkness, but as a chal-

<sup>37</sup> Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 51-100*, 396.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 51-100*, 396.

<sup>39</sup> Davidson, *Vitality of Worship*, 292.

<sup>40</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms 42-89*, 656.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Tate, *51-100*, 404.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Tate, *51-100*, 404.

lenge to YHWH to put an end to his irrational out-of-character behaviour and to show Himself as the God He has promised to be: the God of my salvation.<sup>43</sup>

#### **D CONCLUDING REMARKS: PSALM 88 AND THE LIFE OF FAITH**

How then does Ps 88 address the life of faith? What are the theological issues the psalm puts on the table? What is this psalm doing in our Bible? The following issues come to mind.

*First*, the psalm provides a good dose of realism in the face of so called faith that is very unrealistic and romantic. Life is like that. Life is unpredictable; life can be extremely harsh and filled with suffering. The psalms address all aspects of life, not just the good parts. Here in Ps 88 faith faces life as it is. The psalm shows that the experience of darkness also has its place in the life of faith. Psalm 88 reminds us that life does not always have happy endings. Suffering and loss are part and parcel of our human existence, even for people who are devoted to God. "There are cold, wintry nights of the soul, when bleakness fills every horizon and darkness seems nearly complete."<sup>44</sup> Any theology that is unwilling to face the darkness and turns away from confronting the darkness is a weakened and attenuated theology.

*Second*, the poet affirms that sometimes God reveals a dark side and that He is to blame for the darkness. In Ps 88, the darkness is the result of God's inattention, and therefore the psalmist accuses God and holds Him accountable. Even then, the psalmist continues to plead his case with no-holds barred honesty. He doesn't shirk away from confronting God, even if God stays silent.

*Third*, the psalm is not a psalm of mute depression. Speech continues in the psalm, YHWH is still addressed. Even when YHWH is unfaithful as God of salvation, even in the face of total abandonment, Israel stays faithful in its speech. Prayer should continue, even when only darkness is left, it should continue, even when God is silent, and ignoring, and irrational, prayer should still be addressed to Him. Although his prayer provides no answer, but only led to more troubling questions, the psalmist kept on praying. This is faith; the pouring out of one's pain and hurt and bitterness and experiences of darkness and abandonment, before God, even when He doesn't answer; even when He is responsible for all the pain and suffering. In the face of God's silence, the psalmist does not stay silent. The psalmist prays and keeps praying even though everything in him screams that God doesn't care, God isn't interested.

Even when they find themselves in complete darkness, in utter despair, "Israel knows that it has to do with YHWH. It cannot be otherwise. YHWH may

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 51-100*, 396.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Tate, "Psalm 88," 94.

not have to do with Israel . . . Israel has no option but to deal with YHWH.”<sup>45</sup> It is part of their identity and character in this life. Israel must deal with YHWH when He is there and when He gives life. But they must also deal with Him when He is silent, when He is absent, when He does not reveal Himself as God of salvation. “To be Israel means to address God, even in God’s unresponsive absence.”<sup>46</sup> The truth of Ps 88 is that Israel lives in a world where sometimes there is no answer, a world where God is not always on call. This does not mean that we stop calling.<sup>47</sup>

*Fourth*, the psalmist has not abandoned belief. Kathleen Harmon<sup>48</sup> rightly argues that Ps 88 may appear to indicate a loss of faith, but it in fact does the opposite. When one continues to speak to God when He keeps silent is an expression of bold faith. Someone who has lost his or her faith would stop praying, choosing not to address a God whose silence is proof that He doesn’t exist. Here we find the psalmist reacting to God’s silence with intense prayer. “This psalm, like the faith of Israel, is utterly contained in the notion that Yahweh is here and must be addressed. Yahweh must be addressed, even if Yahweh never answers.”<sup>49</sup>

The poet provides us with fleeting glimpses of his faith. He still speaks to God, he affirms his relationship (God of my salvation), he believes praise is the norm and wishes to return to it, he acknowledges YHWH’s attributes (faithful love, faithfulness, righteousness, wonderful works). Rhetorically the psalm shows that it is part of believers’ life experience that they will suffer and experience abandonment and despair. The psalm moves beyond a safe pattern of lament, where there is usually something positive – a vow to praise, a confession of trust, an affirmation of YHWH.<sup>50</sup> In Ps 88 the picture of lament, darkness, distress, desolation, and despair is much clearer than any other.

I want to conclude with the words of Walter Brueggemann: “One has two options: either to wait in silence, or to speak it again. What one may not do is to rush to an easier psalm, or to give up on Yahweh.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, 80.

<sup>46</sup> Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, 81.

<sup>47</sup> Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, 78-79.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Kathleen Harmon, “Growing in Our Understanding of the Psalms Part 2: Persisting in Prayer When God is Silent,” *LitMin* 20/1 (2011): 53.

<sup>49</sup> Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, 79.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Howard, “Rhetoric of Lament,” 144-145.

<sup>51</sup> Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, 80.

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